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Public broadcasting, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), and its online services

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Hye-Kyung Lee

King's College London¹

Introduction

The impacts of new media, convergence culture, and participatory cultural consumption have so far been examined mainly from the perspective of commercial cultural business by scholars in cultural studies, media and communications, marketing, and management. It is not until recent years that we began realising the above forces would also heavily affect public cultural institutions ranging from public service broadcasters, museums to theatres, which are endowed with educational missions and the status of national institution, and are usually financed publicly. While trying to adjust to the new media environment by introducing online platforms to widen the audience base and deepen their engagement, these public institutions are likely to undergo a complicated process of transformation, the nature of which we have yet to explore.

As part of this transformation, institutions face a series of fundamental questions on their rationale, identity, remit, and relationship with the public. For instance, the key public cultural institutions in London—such as the National Gallery, the British Museum, and the National Theatre—are questioning how to extend their public service remit to online spaces, how to balance existing and online services, what kind of relationship to establish with online audiences, and how their authoritative voice, derived from the existing expert knowledge, can coexist with cultural content generated by the audience (King's Cultural Institute 2011). Public cultural institutions' embrace of online and digital technologies would not only reshape their delivery of existing public

¹ This chapter has been revised and contributed to the *Routledge Handbook of New Media in Asia* (2015).

service but also introduce a pressing need for the institutions' reconfiguration of their identity and function. As seen from the debate around the BBC's online strategies, this could remould the broader ecology of cultural industries by affecting business models and technological developments of commercial cultural providers in varying ways. By looking into the case of the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS)'s¹ online strategies, this chapter argues that the transformation is heavily tied to the institution's path that has been conditioned by the political and social landscape of the country and its own understanding (or lack of it) of its public service remit.

This chapter shows that the KBS has suffered from Korean society's absence of clear vision of public service broadcasting and, consequently, maintains a weak social legitimacy (H. Cho 2012; Y. Kim 2001; I. Park 2007), which is affecting the orientation of its online strategies. That is, the underdevelopment of consensus on the broadcaster's public responsibilities deters it from actively "imagining" online activities as an expansion of public service delivery. Rather than exploring online spaces' potential to form a public mediasphere, the KBS is using them mainly as platforms to promote its existing programmes and provide programme-specific information. The commercialism that characterizes the country's mediascape today heavily informs the broadcaster's view of online services. Under the rhetoric of audience engagement and participation, its online spaces imitate popular cultural spaces, such as online portals or fansites, and indicate a strong interest in valorizing programme content, such as TV drama and entertainment series.

When the broadcaster is concerned primarily with the existing "audience" in its narrow sense or "fans" of its programme content (E. Cho 2005), there is little attention given to "the public" that the broadcaster is expected to serve: inform, educate, entertain, challenge, engage, and collaborate with. The limited public service orientation of online spaces and the accommodation of commercial imperatives are not an issue for the KBS alone. This is because the shift from political to market parameters without serious reflection on public and civic roles of culture has characterised Korean cultural—both arts and media—policy and management since the 1990s. This chapter proposes that

now is the time to scrutinise the commercial framework of the KBS's online strategies and the embrace of market-oriented discourses. Debating the KBS's online remit brings us back to the fundamental question of the broadcaster's identity as a "public broadcaster", the idea of which was never fully explored or has never generated social consensus since the broadcaster's inception (H. Cho 2012).

Public culture and public service broadcasting

Public service broadcasting (PSB) resides at the heart of a society's public culture. This chapter broadly defines public culture as a collection of cultural, artistic, and media infrastructure, services, and programmes that contribute to the public benefit and cultural well-being, especially those created, circulated, displayed and/or communicated primarily for such purposes. From an economic perspective, public culture is seen as a type of "public good": it is normally financed and provided publicly as its non-exclusivity and non-rivalry makes it widely accessible to members of society so privatising it would be problematic. It is also suggested that society is willing to maintain, advance, and protect public culture from market pressures as it serves as a merit good, a current and future resource for members of society, and a source of positive externalities.

Taking the perspective of public policy, we focus primarily on government and public sector organizations' cultural services and infrastructures that aim at enhancing cultural well-being and the quality of life of the public. The sociocultural perspective that public culture consists of particular activities and services to which a society collectively assigns cultural value allows us to view this culture as a public good and service. The spectrum of public culture would be unfixed as its core constituents may change over time and differ across societies because cultural values would be comparative and specific temporally. This implies that public culture inherently entails both cultural consensus and the challenges to it. Its content and boundaries, therefore, are subject to constant questioning and debating, and, perhaps, such processes would be an essential part of public culture

itself. Public cultural institutions play crucial roles in advancing and sustaining the ecology of this type of culture.

In the past, public culture was likely to be defined by the cultural authority held by the state, elite classes, and cultural experts while its elitism and paternalism were criticised by popular culture and alternative cultural practices. In spite of the prevalence of postmodern, relativist, and market-centred perspectives of culture nowadays, many societies try to redefine public culture rather than simply giving up such an idea. This context presents the rise of digital technologies and online communications as a new opportunity to reconfigure public culture by allowing public cultural institutions' deeper, wider and more direct engagements with members of the public and by democratising cultural production and distribution. This opportunity, however, is causing some fundamental tensions to arise as the democratization of culture necessitates the decentralization of symbolic resources such as the expert knowledge traditionally held by cultural institutions and experts.

The question is then how to redistribute these resources between existing cultural producers and members of the public who are active in creating and communicating their own culture online, and what roles public cultural institutions could play to strengthen the public elements of our everyday culture when it is increasingly individualized and decentralized with online social networks becoming hot spots for cultural dissemination and consumption. Discovering ways to redefine and enrich public culture is an important policy agenda given the penetration of commercial imperatives in everyday culture and cultural industries' attempt to capitalise on consumers' creativity via actively sharing symbolic resources with them (van Dijck 2009). Under this new media and cultural landscape, cultural policy's traditional agenda, including accessibility, participation, and excellence, would be given new, currently undetermined, meanings.

One can argue that PSB is well situated to play decisive roles in reconfiguring public culture. This is because PSB is a popular, accessible, and ubiquitous medium that delivers a wide range of

programme content and is already an essential part of most people's cultural life. The idea and institution of PSB were born in a Western European context with strong political and professional consensus that public broadcasting is best delivered when the broadcaster's independence of political and commercial pressures is guaranteed, and when PSB can provide universal service for all members of the public and not just particular sections of it. Although PSB has never been free from the accusation of being elitist or commercialised, it has long been seen as a democratic medium that addresses issues that are important for wider society and provides diverse programmes, from education to information to entertainment, including programmes that target minority groups in society. While pursuing cultural diversity, PSB programmes are expected to contribute to the support of social cohesion, fostering shared public life, and reflecting and cementing public opinion (Freeman 2008: 147-8 cited in Tunstall 2010). Like many other countries, Korea has looked westward at the BBC as a model for its public broadcasting since the 1990s (H. Cho 2012: 41). What is often overlooked, however, is the fact that the BBC's creation was rooted firmly in the British society's cultural consensus, led by the cultural hegemony of middle-classes who also constituted the core of British civil society, although this consensus has been questioned heavily. Meanwhile the German PSB system is based on strong corporatist consensus between the state, the business sector, and social groups, as seen in the country's two public broadcasters' governance where a range of social and interest groups' participation in decision making is structurally guaranteed. Additionally, the reliable and consistent public funding in the form of license fees attributes to the success and achievements of British and German PSB.

PSB going online and its key issues

The rise of new media, online platforms, convergence culture, and participatory consumption has seriously challenged PSB as a one-to-many broadcasting of predefined quality programmes. It has been widely reported that young audiences today prefer to access specific content on non-traditional

broadcasting platforms such as a PC, mobile phone, tablet PC, game console and MP3 device at their chosen moment. The traditional linear model of broadcasting may no longer be sustainable and, consequently, many broadcasters are now developing on-demand services that are accessible through multiple platforms—the BBC's *iPlayer* is the most successful example. As proven by the YouTube phenomenon, cultural consumers today have a strong tendency to exercise active agency in media making and disseminating, and are not simply satisfied with the programme content provided by professional media producers and companies. Remaking and recreating media content is becoming a part of everyday culture, where cultural production and consumption converge, making obsolete the traditional distinction between providers and users, companies and markets, and broadcasters and audiences.

Today's media environment and consumption presents a series of serious questions about PSB. First, the fact that the traditional service of PSB is a small section of the ever-enlarging and complicated media ecology and its diminishing audience size and ratings tend to undermine the existing rationale of PSB (serving all members of the public) and its public funding. Facing the proliferation of free online platforms such as YouTube (global) and Youku (Chinese) where audience's free choice of programming is seen as democratic and empowering, PSB is pressured to reconsider their top-down, centralised, paternalistic nature of programme delivery. The dominant discourse on PSB seems divided broadly into two themes: PSB reduction and PSB expansion. The first discourse is informed by the aforementioned trends and derived from the view that PSB is an obsolete institution technologically and socio-culturally, since broadcasting service is no longer tied to airwaves that used to be regarded as a scarce public resource; additionally, free audio and video content is now available on multiple channels for various devices. Taking the notion of consumer sovereignty, one can say that it would be irrational for consumers to continue to support PSB, which requires a licence fee, when they prefer YouTube to PSB usage. This argument fits within the broader discourse of the marketization of the broadcasting sector. It further includes the view that

existing regulations on commercial terrestrial broadcasters—for instance, commercial terrestrial channels must provide a certain type and amount of PSB content—should be reduced given that other commercial (online) platforms provide broadcasting services without the same restrictions, and the commercial terrestrial broadcasters are only one of many such providers available today. Meanwhile, the discourse of PSB expansion argues that the existing PSB needs to expand into new media so high-quality PSB content can be produced and made accessible for the public (Jakubowicz 2010). This view suggests that embracing new technologies and converging existing broadcasting services with new media could reconfigure public culture and serve as a nod for public knowledge and information, and provide a space where expert knowledge and collective intellect validate each other, leading to both democratic and critical production of knowledge. Tension and debates arising would be part of this new public culture.

Public broadcasting in the South Korean context

It is crucial to note that the idea of public service broadcasting, which is embedded in Western European public broadcasting has not been fully explored and implemented in South Korea (hereafter Korea). In this sense, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) is better defined as a “public broadcasting corporation” rather than a “public service broadcaster”, because its public service remit is not as clear as its legal status as a public corporation. The *Korean Broadcasting System Act* (1972-2000) did not give a definition for public broadcasting.² The new *Broadcasting Act* (2000), which incorporated the *Korean Broadcasting System Act*, states in its 44th clause that KBS (1) has “public responsibilities” that would implement “broadcasting’s public responsibilities” (the 5th clause) and realize “broadcasting’s impartiality and public benefits” (the 6th clause), (2) should provide universal service of quality programmes, (3) should develop new broadcasting programmes, services, and technologies that are beneficial to its audience, and (4) should develop and broadcast programmes that advance national culture and promote national cohesion. In addition, the KBS’s current website

says that its public remit includes monitoring and critiquing the social environment and forming public opinion. Nevertheless, there has traditionally been weak consensus on the interpretation of the above wording and on the relationship between the broadcaster, government, and public. It is within this context that, in summer 2014, the new president of the KBS promised to end the continuing debate on the broadcaster's lack of impartiality and prove its status as a public broadcaster (KBS 2014).

The KBS started as a government-owned and managed broadcaster (*gukyeong bangsong*) when the Republic of Korea was born in 1948 after the thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule until 1945 and the three years of American military army occupation afterwards. The government maintained a tight grip on the KBS and a strong belief that broadcasting, like other governmental activities and public services, should play parts in the country's ideological and political endeavour to counter the communist regime in North Korea and forge social cohesion (Ministry of Culture and Public Information 1979: 191). The broadcasting sector was monopolized by the KBS until the mid-1950s when religious and commercial broadcasters came to being. The KBS's TV service began in 1961, followed by commercial TV.

In 1973, the KBS became a public corporation that delivered publicly managed broadcasting (*gongyeong bangsong*) soon after President Park Chung Hee's implementation of the October Reform (*Siwol Yousin*) to strengthen his political power and make his presidential tenure permanent. According to the government, the main reason for the transformation was the existing system's problems, such as bureaucracy, low flexibility, and difficulty in recruiting talented professionals (Ministry of Culture and Public Information 1979: 201). The *Korean Broadcasting System Act* (1972) defined the KBS as a state key broadcasting system (*gukga gigan bangsong*) and required it to actualise the impartiality of broadcasting, delivery of public benefits, and provision of high-quality broadcasting that is accessible by all citizens. Unfortunately, there was neither society-wide

discussion nor consensus on what public broadcasting (*gongyeong bangsong*) would mean and should deliver, and this situation continued.

Throughout the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, the country saw a stark power imbalance between the dictatorial government and the almost non-existent civil society, implying that there was little social or civil force that could play active roles in determining the nature of public broadcasting. Similarly, the broadcasting reform in the 1980s, which resulted in the incorporation of four commercial radio stations and the commercial TBC TV into the KBS and the KBS's acquisition of 65% of MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation) shares, took place without public consultation as the government wanted better control over the sector. The KBS's mixed financing also raised questions on its identity as a public broadcaster. Initially, the KBS relied solely on licence fees; however, a gap between income and expenditures caused by the introduction of colour TV in allowed the KBS to raise money via advertising in 1980. Since then, the proportion of advertising income to its total income gradually increased, indicating that the KBS could not be free from commercial influences even during the three successive military governments until 1993. Considering these circumstances, defining Korea's public broadcasting as public service broadcasting could be misleading.

Despite being a public broadcaster, KBS was continuously susceptible to political pressures from the government. The noticeable political bias in programmes such as news reports caused high frustration and anger among audiences to the point that some of them launched a nationwide "license fee refusal" campaign in the mid-1980s (see H. Cho 2012 and Kim 2001 for detailed accounts of the campaign). It was not a mere tax resistance but a political protest against the broadcaster's subordination to governmental imperatives. The protest triggered KBS workers' self-reflection and the formation of a trade union, which believed that democratic and independent broadcasting would be a key driving force of a society wide democratic movement (H. Cho 2012: 48). The KBS's

commercialism and the declining quality of children's programmes further exacerbated Korean society's distrust of the KBS.

During the 1990s, the KBS gained more independence from political imperatives while commercialism rose as a new control mechanism of it (Kim 2001: 99). The emergence and expansion of the civil sector influenced the broadcaster's programming via monitoring and auditing. For instance, civil groups protested against the decline of children's programmes and programme quality. While the key issue for civil groups in the 1980s was promoting independent journalism, the main concern for them in the 1990s was increasing commercialism of the sector. The emerging multichannel environment (cable and satellite TV was introduced in 1995 and 2002, respectively) meant that the KBS was in fierce competition with other channels for audiences as well as advertising income. The proportion of advertising income of the broadcaster's total income in 2003, 2008 and 2012 was 54.95%, 41.8% and 41%, respectively (KBS 2013) though the KBS stopped advertising on the main KBS1 TV and KBS 1 Radio in 1994 to strengthen these main channels' public nature. The KBS's overall market orientation has resulted in a lack of distinction between its programme content and those on other channels. For instance, although KBS1 TV is keen on broadcasting educational and informative programmes (*gyoyang program*), its drama and entertainment programmes compete fiercely with other TV programmes for a share of the audience.

The Korean society's concern with political and market imperatives explains why the KBS license fee has been frozen at 2,500 Korean won (approx. US\$ 2.5) per month for the past thirty-three years with the public's heavy opposition against a fee raise. For many Koreans, a fee raise is not a condition for achieving PSB; rather, they see concrete evidence of the KBS's transformation into a PSB as an essential condition for a fee raise. The two consecutive conservative governments (2008-2013 and 2013-2018) and the weakened political independence of the broadcaster apparently lead Koreans to prioritise independent journalism and political impartiality as key issues while leaving questions on the broader meaning of public broadcasting unasked.

The KBS and its online services

Currently, all three main terrestrial broadcasters in Korea—KBS (public), MBC (non-profit), and SBS (commercial) —are providing online services, including on-demand audio/video available via streaming and downloading. The broadcasters launched websites where they began online services in the 1990s and expanded the range of offerings for audiences by setting up subsidiaries dedicated to Internet services. The KBS was at the forefront of this development, launching its homepage in 1995 and offering real-time streaming in 1996. Its video-on-demand news programme started in 1997, and extended to include other programs in 1998. The main purpose of the KBS website was promoting the broadcaster and its programmes domestically and abroad (mainly for overseas Koreans), and there was little consideration about the potential of Internet services for public broadcasting and consequent financial implications (Yoo 2004: 46-7).

The broadcaster's plans to utilize the Internet for public broadcasting purposes was announced in the 1999 "Promise to Viewers and Listeners" (3 March 1999), where it promised to: provide publicly beneficial programs; be responsive to and reflect audience's views; provide precise, impartial, and reliable news; improve the quality of entertainment and drama programmes; strengthen programmes for children, young people, and marginal groups; promote environmental protection; strengthen Korean cultural identity and develop cultural diversity; promote and protect the Korean language; broadcast digitally; and innovate with management (S.-H. Cho 1999). Yet, the Promise's understanding of the Internet was limited: the Internet would be a means to communicate with audiences, disseminate information on its key programmes, offer the KBS publications electronically, and strengthen the KBS website's section for disabled audiences. The subsequent development of the KBS online strategies lacked clear guidelines for public broadcasting, and this, combined with the shortage of funding, resulted in the prevalence of commercialism.

The KBS website soon became popular and attracted a growing audience (the number of daily visits to the website on 4 October 2000 was 10 million and the number doubled in one year) thanks to the penetration of high-speed broadband and the PC in Korean households (Yoo 2004: 48). This trend encouraged the KBS to create Crezio.com, a joint commercial venture between the KBS and KT, the biggest telecommunications company in the country, in 2000. Crezio ran the KBS website—and the homepages for its programmes—where programmes were live-streamed and their video-on-demand was available for four weeks. Crezio also experimented with producing online-only programmes, such as online daily sitcoms and the broadcasting of internet game matches on the KBS website, browsing potential business models. Nevertheless, offering online-only content was not successful in terms of attracting a critical-mass audience, and this meant Crezio's main income was the fee from the KBS for running its website. In 2003, the website surpassed 834,000 members and thereby proved its ongoing popularity (An and Lee 2012).

When Crezio.com was renamed KBS Internet in 2002, its commercial business model was strengthened. In the same year, it began running Conpia.com (Content Utopia, a commercial digital content distribution website) and launched various commercial activities including caller ring, character, and shopping businesses. The biggest change, however, the commodification of the KBS programmes. That is, while the KBS homepage continued to provide a free catch-up service for a reduced period (2 weeks), Conpia began commercial video-on-demand services in 2002. The KBS chose this 'indirect' commercialization strategy via an external website to satisfy its status as a public broadcaster. The year 2002 marked the start of commercialization of SBS and KBS programme content on the Internet, and this trend was soon followed by the non-profit MBC. At the same time, these three broadcasters began discussing potentials to develop Conpia into a commercial hub of terrestrial broadcasting content (KBS Internet 7 January 2003), albeit without a concrete outcome. The move to commercial online services did not spark debate within the KBS as there was

a widely shared concern about the shortage of income and online sales of its programmes was seen as a new way to raise additional financial resource (Interviewees 1 and 2).³

With a weak consensus on whether or not the Internet should be included in the remit of public broadcasting and how it should be financed, different sections of the KBS had different ideas about its Internet presence (Interviewees 1 and 2). For example, policy makers at the KBS saw the Internet as a new platform to offer public broadcasting programmes for free without engaging commercial activities while those working at KBS Internet, which was the broadcaster's commercial subsidiary, saw it as a space where profit-generating activities would be carried out. This explains the broadcaster's ultimate failure to keep the website free of advertisement despite its repeated assertion that its programmes on the website would be free of commercialism indefinitely. For instance, in 2003 the KBS promised free provisions of programme content and the removal of all commercial activities, including advertising, sponsorship, and content sales, from its website (Yoo 2004: 50). The statement led to the broadcaster's subsequent announcement of a KBS homepage reform ("clean homepage") on 3 March 2004, which would remove advertising and commercial business and develop the website into the "third" public channel (after the existing two channels, KBS1 and KBS2). Advertisements, however, began to reappear in autumn the same year and became a continuing trend (Interviewee 1). In 2006, the website removed commercials and created homepages for the disabled, KBS e-cinema, and an online TV museum to enhance its public service roles. Nevertheless, it reintroduced commercial advertisements soon thereafter.

Despite the KBS's repeated promises to keep its programmes free and reflect the spirit of public broadcasting in its management of online services, there has not been a solid understanding on whether the online services would be a core of public broadcasting or auxiliary services; further, discussions at practical levels took place between those at the KBS and KBS Internet, which is commercially operated (Interviewee 2). Amid audiences' suspicion about the KBS's commercialism, the broadcaster defined itself as one of many service providers in the market, meaning that its public

service remit would include the provisioning of programme information, live streaming, and low-quality video-on-demand services only. With the merge between KBS Media and KBS Internet in 2011, the broadcaster developed more concrete and coherent content business models based on “one source, multi uses” across online and offline channels. In 2009, the three terrestrial broadcasters created a joint venture, Conting, to prevent their content’s unauthorised distribution online and supply one-spot video-on-demand services for TV audiences (Interviewee 2). Currently, the KBS website offers low-quality videos (300K) only, while standard (500K) and high-quality videos (2M) are sold on Conpia and Conting in various paid packages. These commercial websites’ free content consists of a limited number of episodes of ongoing drama series and a larger number of episodes of a single educational programme.

The KBS website’s layout and content look similar to other broadcasters’ websites, although it more actively introduces select key programmes, including news and documentaries. These websites’ main components are news reports, information on entertainment and drama, and popular videos. Even in the case of the KBS, it is difficult to see how the broadcaster selects website content based on what criteria or how public service remit affects related decisions. The overall layout implies that the broadcaster offers a range of popular programmes and information so its audience can decide what to view. The broadcaster’s cultural authority and expert knowledge, the legitimacy of which has been questioned along with its susceptibility to political pressure, seems to be decentralised within the commercial framework.

Conclusion

The KBS launched online services as early as the mid-1990s, ahead of its time not only with the application of online communications technologies, but also by experimenting with the production and broadcasting of online-only programme content. Its initial belief was that the Internet would be a distinct space to deliver online-only, unique content; however, it is difficult to say that this

experiment was successful as the Internet has become an additional outlet for rebroadcasting existing TV and radio programmes. With an absence of contemplation and debate on the public broadcasting roles of KBS online services, the continuous license fee freeze and financial constraints have encouraged the broadcaster to pursue a commercial approach with online services. In a way, this strategy can be seen as something in between PSB reduction and PSB expansion: PSB expansion driven by commercialism. The long-standing public opinion is that a license fee raise should come after the broadcaster's genuine demonstration of "public broadcasting", especially showing its programmes' political impartiality and independence of governmental influence. Consequently, the broadcaster is finding it hard to argue for the potential centrality of online services based on the provision of public broadcasting and this has led to the deepening of commercial oriented development of its online strategies. In the current discourse of public broadcasting in Korea, new media and online services are not seen as key determinants of the future of the KBS as a public broadcaster. Facilitating debate and forming consensus on the aims, uses, content, and financing of KBS online services is as politically important as the long-standing and re-occurring issue of independent journalism; however, a widely held view within the KBS and civil society is that achieving the latter is a prerequisite for addressing the former. It is unfortunate that as Korea's recent discussion of public broadcasting is almost solely tied to independent journalism and impartial news reports, there is little scope to explore the broadcaster's wider roles in reconfiguring the country's public cultural landscape and bringing public cultural elements to online spaces do not draw public attention.

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Endnotes

¹ KBS consists of three TV channels (KBS1 TV, KBS2 TV, and KBS World), seven radio channels (KBS1, KBS2, KBS3, KBS FM1, BS FM2, Korean Nation, and KBS World Radio) and four terrestrial DMB channels. In addition, it provides data broadcasting and new media services.

² *The Korean Broadcasting System Act* (1972-2000) only states the aim of KBS as contributing to the development of broadcasting culture and the improvement of public welfare by effective broadcasting for domestic and overseas audiences and making the whole nation accessible to broadcasting. It asks KBS to clarify its aims in its constitutional document, implying that the actual meaning of public broadcasting would depend on the broadcaster's interpretation. KBS was expected to operate within the framework of broadcasting ethics set by the *Broadcasting Act* (1973): respect for human rights, fairness, national spirit of independence (*jucheseong*), national culture, guiding children and young people, and public morality. The law did not define public broadcasting.

³ The author interviewed two professionals who worked at KBS Internet in the mid-2000s. The interviews took place at their offices in KBS on 31 July and 4 August 2014.